Happily Never After

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Abstract
The research topic I addressed regarded the idealized concept of marriage and the “happy ending” seen in a majority of fairytales, compared to the darker Bluebeard tale that focuses on what happens after the marriage, a time frame rarely addressed. This tale places emphasis on material good as a means of entering marriages, which often causes members of the marriage to have limited knowledge of their spouse and the skeletons in their closets. This can lead to grave consequences such as loss of innocence, being placed in subordinate gender roles for women, and reliance on male saviors, all impacting both male and female identities. I use close reading of mainly the Perrault version of the “Bluebeard” tale and also some of the Brothers Grimm version to support my argument. I used a variety of secondary sources as well in order to provide another perspective and also to validate my claims.
“And they lived happily ever after…” The typical ending to traditional fairytales forces one to wonder, what happens after the wedding bells cease to ring? What if things change and the typically rushed marriages do not pan out, or the spouse thought to be well known was not what they said they were? The “Bluebeard” tales present an unusual type of fairytale that rarely gets attention because it contrasts the “norm” of the commonplace tale. Bluebeard, a serial murderer lures a maiden into marriage with his wealth but fails to conceal his dark past in his chamber of death. Clearly because the author has set this story after the marriage has occurred, the reader obtains a perspective that is rarely exposed in fairytales and reveals the implications of women’s inability to choose a suitor. By looking at the combination of women’s motives and Bluebeard’s actions, we can see the emphasis in society on wealth and luxury as a precursor to marriage. This can have deadly consequences because women in fairytales often choose lavish belongings over true love and compatibility, leading to loss of innocence, inability to escape demeaning gender roles, and subordination as a result of the unforeseen qualities in their spouse.

The entire institution of marriage for women is detrimental to female independence and many women are aware of this but still buy into this ideal. Men become the guardian of women’s reproductive and professional labors and control sexual relationships to benefit their needs. Therefore, the system keeps women completely emotionally and physically at the mercy and duty of their male counterpart. Woman’s destinies become marriage while male’s destinies are much greater; men strive for power, wealth, and dominance over others (Bergoffen 20). Shunting girl’s dreams to the side to make way for male supremacy creates ideals that girls are intended to mold themselves into, regardless of how much of themselves they lose along the way. In Bluebeard’s time, the seventeenth century, women were meant to be seen and not heard. This ideal was relevant to the time period of the “Bluebeard” tales. During this time period marriages were arranged and dowries were paid to families in exchange for wives, objectifying women. Willing or not, a woman entered marriages unknowing of the man she was being assigned to for life. These ideals belittle women to mere pieces of meat for males to pick from and devour, Bluebeard’s specialty.

The often idolized institution of marriage for girls in fairytales is reinvented in the “Bluebeard” fairytales. The girls in this tale are very reluctant to wed the mysterious suitor but are forced through family obligations. Families forced their daughters into marriage and it was imbedded into a girl’s mind that having a wedding was her ultimate goal in life. Marriage was seen as an instrument for financial gain rather than to solidify their relationship with their soul mate. These often forced matrimonies portray marriage as an institution that condemns females to a fate similar to prostitution. They are selling themselves to a man in exchange for wealth and protection. More potent than reluctance is the apparent fear towards Bluebeard. There are many girls who run in fright from the ugly man and his blue beard. As author Marina Warner explains, it is the blueness of his beard that makes the girls so afraid. She elaborates by saying that it is because it makes him seem as if he is going against human nature by producing something so
frightening. Furthermore, she says that it is not that he dyes his beard to make him look this way, but it is that he can create something so hideous on his own (Warner 124). In Perrault’s tale two sisters fight with each other because neither wants to be forced into marriage with such a grotesque creature. The hideous Bluebeard character attempts to trick his brides-to-be to accept him by using his plethora of wealth and lavish belongings. In this version of the tale, the fanciness of Bluebeard’s home and the magnitude of riches is enough to get them believing he was a “fine fellow” (Perrault 144). Perrault focuses heavily on these possessions. He illustrates the numerous “tapestries,” “caskets” for jewels, and brilliant looking glasses (145). Clearly, the emphasis on material goods overrides the list of negative qualities of his character.

Soon after the marriage, Bluebeard is forced away from home on a business trip and the beginnings of a “happy” marriage began to unravel. Once Bluebeard leaves the homestead, friends and neighbors flock to the house to see more of its glory. They were too frightened because of Bluebeard’s appearance to visit when he was home. When describing the elation of the guests, Perrault uses terms such as “splendid,” “magnificent,” and “beauty” (145). Once again, having numerous rooms and frivolous belongings coincides with positive, praising vocabulary. These connections established at a young age create the desire for material goods rather than emotional bonds, and superficial play things rather than true love.

Emphasis on wealth can teach the reader that those who jump into relationships for the wrong reasons can meet a completely unpredicted fate. Although this tale is a much more extreme version of marriage, it follows the same pattern as most others: strangers marry strangers. No one truly knows the person they are marrying; just like the prince who never knows the damsel in distress beyond her beauty. It seems that the most important factors in all marriage are physical appearance and wealth; displaying both qualities is ideal, but usually having one can overpower the quality that is lacking. For example in Perrault’s version of the Cinderella fairytale, “Donkeyskin”, the wealthy Prince saves the young girl from her incestuous father and miserable life as a kitchen hand because of her unsurpassable beauty. Once revealed from her suit of donkey skins, Perrault writes,

She arrived at the king’s chambers and crossed the rooms in her ceremonial clothes whose radiant beauty had never been before seen. Her lovely blonde hair glittered with diamonds that emitted a bright light with their many rays. Her blue eyes, large and soft, were filled with proud majesty, but never inflicted pain and gave only pleasure when they looked at you. Her waist was so small and fine that you could encircle it with two hands. Even showing their charms and their divine grace, the women of the court and all their ornaments lost any kind of appeal by comparison. (115)

Perrault’s diction surrounding the physical attributes of the “princess, using words such as “radiant,” “soft,” or “lovely” includes no mention of her intelligence, work ethic, or life goals. The prince does not know this girl as an individual, yet he values her and wants her hand in marriage as a way to possess her beauty. Who does not want a beautiful belonging to flaunt? Most fairytales exclude the elements after
marriage because they do not want to explore the possibility that there may not be a “happy ending” after all. Fairytales may vary in plot, but when one considers the basis of the relationships, they are all based on the same shallow, superficial pleasures.

All of Bluebeard’s wives choose to marry Bluebeard based solely on his money, not his internal attributes or personality. This can clearly have a crippling mental impact if one’s person worth is valued or appreciated because of possessions and not who they are, and may thus explain his disastrous history with wives. Any rational person would not agree to wed Bluebeard, a complete stranger, based on the slaughter of his previous wives. Originally, both sisters use their better judgment and avoid his hand in marriage because of his savage ugliness, but one eventually concedes to the promise for financial support and indulgence for her and her family. Perrault writes, “neither of the two girls wanted to marry him, and the offer went back and forth between them, since they added even more to their sense of disgust was that he had already married several women, and no one knew what had become of them” (144). These women had ample warning about their imminent future but denied them because of the temporary relief from their inadequate lives. This shows that societies value being wealthy and desired by a man as compared to being single, liberated and in control of one’s welfare. Such narrow ideals place girls on a path towards obedience and in the case of Bluebeard’s wives, loss of innocence.

Since Bluebeard has always been married because of his wealth, how is he to know if his wives are ever sincere and love him, or if it is always just a superficial relationship? In the fairy tale, Bluebeard gives each of his wives unlimited amounts of money in hope of making them happy enough so that they will not see the ugliness of his character when opening his secret chamber. Perrault writes,

‘Here,’ he said, ‘are the keys to my two large store rooms. Here are the ones for the gold and silver china that is too good for everyday use. Here are the ones for my strongboxes, where my gold and silver are kept. Here are the ones for the caskets where my jewels are stored. And finally, this is the passkey to all the rooms in my mansion. As for this particular key, it is the key to the small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor. Open anything you want. Go anywhere you wish. But I absolutely forbid you to enter that little room, and if you so much as open it a crack, there will be no limit to my anger.” (145)

This passage illustrates the dominating ways Bluebeard controls his wife’s actions. The author uses harsh, demanding language such as “forbid,” and “anger,” to characterize Bluebeard as dominant and oppressive in the eyes of Bluebeard’s wife. This tone and hostile commands are clearly no way to treat one’s wife and therefore enhances the darkness of Bluebeard’s character Perrault creates. Bluebeard also makes her believe that she has control, or a choice, over her actions by providing her with all of the keys to his home. However, he stifles this liberty by limiting how she can use her power. By testing his wives to see which will obey his one stipulation, he can determine which are greedy and only want to see if there is more to his fortune versus which will be subordinate to his commands. If his current wife had gotten to know Bluebeard, beyond
the size of his fortune, she would have discovered his deadly secret or avoided him completely because of his corrupt history with women before her own life was on the line.

By entering Bluebeard’s chamber of death, it is very clear that his wife made a fatal error in marrying Bluebeard without getting to know his true character and tendencies. Plagued by curiosity, Bluebeard’s wife enters the forbidden room while Bluebeard is away on business and sees the carcasses of Bluebeard’s previous wives, the shock causing her to drop the room key. Once the wives enter the chamber and witness the horrors inside, they lose their innocence forever. As Perrault states, “having noticed that the key to the room was stained with blood, [the wife] wiped it two or three times, but the blood would not come off at all” (146). As author Marina Warner explains, the contaminated key represents the wives betrayal of their husband’s wishes and also establishes a test of loyalty which they fail miserably. The key can also be seen as a symbol of lost innocence. Bluebeard preys on young girls who have never been married or with a man before. Tied to betrayal, innocence cannot be reinstated once lost. The blood that will not rub off represents the inability to revert back to a state of innocence as well as how Bluebeard kills these girls at a time of sexual maturation and childbearing (Warner). Women are expected to be virgins at the time of the marriage which ensures purity and giving herself to her husband. Blood dripping from the key represents the loss of this virginity or innocence. Because loss of innocence was forced through such a violent encounter, one can notice a resemblance to rape. Although Bluebeard does not physically rape his wives, his actions create the same effects on developing girls. Taking away of a young girl’s innocence is almost a factor of attraction to him. He blatantly tells his wives he will slaughter them. To his frightened wife, Bluebeard states, “you tried to enter that little room. Well, madam, now that you have opened it, you can go right in and take your place beside the ladies who you saw there” and “you must die madam…and it will be right away” (146). This forcefulness rips innocence and hope directly from the wife. Innocence is a prized possession in girls and used to determine their worth when courting yet Bluebeard violently strips this and leaves them as worthless as the corpses in his chamber.

It is evident that there is a dependence on men as saviors in Perrault’s version of the Bluebeard story, along with many other fairytales. As author Marcia Lieberman explains, rescuing is very predictable for all fairytales and occurs in any form of struggle ranging from abuse to kidnapping to true loves magical kiss (Lieberman 391). Again, in this tale the men have the power to determine the entire life of the woman, beginning with who she will marry, regardless of her opinion, where she can and cannot go within her home, and whether she is killed or saved. This portrays women as completely helpless, a puppet on a string being pulled by her male counterparts. These gender roles limit female freedom and boost the male authority when there is no protest to these roles. The gender roles established in fairytales are both harmful for female and male readers by creating unrealistic expectations. While women are being pressured into marriage and trained to be the ideal subordinate, passive women, males are simultaneously being placed on pedestals. Males, from a young age, are being represented as dominant, masculine, saviors in almost all tales. In “Bluebeard”, boys are taught that they are the head of the household, can place restrictions on women, and have control over their wife’s wellbeing. By
understanding the behaviors of the brothers, readers can begin to make connections that males are always dominant. Boys feel pressure to be macho and constantly look for a “weak” female that they can swoop in to rescue. Rather than looking internally to fix personal flaws they focus outward on helping others, ignoring their own weaknesses. This can be very detrimental because if a young boy is not living up to these interpreted roles, does this mean they are not a true man? This disconnect can lead to gender confusion and unwarranted shame in possessing sensitive or more predominantly feminine characteristics. Not every man must wave a sword, own a woman, or have a chamber of previous wives in order to be a “man.”

In many fairy tales, it is displayed that men are dominant over women. As seen in Perrault’s morals section at the end of the tale, men are no longer as murderous or traumatizing but the dominant role in the relationship is still apparent. He writes, “no longer are husbands so terrible, demanding the impossible, acting unhappy and jealous, with their wives they toe in line; and whatever color their beard might be, it’s not hard to tell which of the pair is master” (148). One example of this dominance is when Bluebeard discovers his wife’s betrayal. He gives her time to collect herself before he slaughters her as he did his previous wives. Instead of escaping or fighting until she has no strength left, she waits for her brothers to save her on charging steads. Not only does she sit around and wait for assistance, she “threw herself at her husband’s feet, weeping and begging his pardon, with all signs of genuine regret for disobeying him” (Perrault 146). She is both literally and figuratively lowering herself beneath her husband. By kneeling down she degrades herself by begging at Bluebeard’s feet as though she is not worthy. This makes her seem inferior and furthers her subordination to her husband’s orders. Also, as author Tivadar Gorilovics writes, Bluebeard’s wife shows all the signs of a remorseful Christian woman but Bluebeard displays no mercy because he has this process down to a science and is well versed in the pleas for salvation from his disobedient wives. Her brothers are simply messengers of justice, coming to stop such a villainous sinner allowing for a semi-peaceful resolution to such a gruesome ordeal (Gorilovics 20). Clearly, the reliance on male savior limits female independence and problem solving skills, teaching young readers that female passivity brings salvation and reward.

Although the current wife’s sister, Sister Anne, appears to aid in the salvation of the wife, she plays no role in the rescue and her ambiguous role makes her appear disconnected or unaware of the dangerous situation her sister is in. While waiting for her brothers to save her, the current wife screams to Sister Anne for assistance in getting her two brothers’ attention. Her sister replies, “I see nothing but the sun shining and the green grass growing” and when pressed for information about the brothers’ whereabouts, “no, oh no, sister, it’s just a flock of sheep” (Perrault 147). Sister Anne seems to be extremely clueless that her sister is about to be murdered unless she is saved by her brothers, thus making her seem almost unattached to the story itself. Perrault’s characterization of Sister Anne supports the theme of powerless women throughout the tale because her addition is unimportant and insignificant. Perrault oppresses women through the creation of his female characters that lack the ability to save themselves.

Perrault gives women little credit in many of his fairytales by going against feminist goals, demeaning female independence, and limiting women’s ability to save themselves from their troubles. This
is contrasted in the Brothers Grimm version of the “Bluebeard” tale, “Fitcher’s Bird,” where the female character is empowered and saves herself and her two sisters based on her own wit. As compared to Perrault’s version of “Bluebeard” where the wife waits idly for assistance, in the Brothers Grimm version, the third sister puts the pieces of her dead sisters (previously slaughtered wives) back together, magically reviving them. She then tricks her husband into carrying them back to their home and upon his return, locks him inside and torches the house, killing him. This version is very unique because the wife thought of the idea to “[crawl] into a barrel of honey, cut open a featherbed and [roll] in the feathers until she looked like a strange bird that a soul would not recognize” in order to lure the husband inside his home with her bird song (Grimm and Grimm 150). The Grimm Brothers give females the capacity and opportunity to make decisions on their own, allowing for female readers to feel confident that they are as capable as men in areas of problem solving and mental strength, which is refreshing when placed next to Perrault’s version. Feminists would agree that Perrault’s degradation of women gives them a negative reputation because they are dependent on others when facing their hardships.

In the “Bluebeard” tale, females are subordinate to the dominating ways of the males. A very important piece of Bluebeard’s chamber is the element of disobedience that drives the wife’s actions. Bluebeard deliberately told her not to enter that specific room but curiosity got the better of her. In the morals section of the fairy tale, Perrault makes it very clear that the blame is on the wives for disobeying their husbands rather than on Bluebeard who is a serial killer. Perrault writes, “curiosity, in spite of its many charms, can bring with it serious regrets; you can see a thousand examples of it every day. Women succumb, but it’s a fleeting pleasure; as soon as you satisfy it, it ceases to be. And it always proves very, very costly” (148). The emphasis on women being in the wrong teaches the reader that women who do not follow every order given to them deserve to be slaughtered. Perrault specifically targets women in this moral section rather than broadening his statement to all of mankind. He then uses the word, “you” which seems to be an attack on his female readers as well. These morals further oppressive stereotypes of women and vilify the innocent while ignoring the true monster.

The uniqueness of the concept of marriage in the “Bluebeard” tale makes it exceptionally effective because it stands out compared to the myriad of less violent marriages in fairytales. As Maria Tatar explains, “Bluebeard” is extremely original in its idea that marriage can be “an institution haunted by the threat of murder” (139). In many other fairytales, marriage is the solution to all problems, not the beginning of demise. The “Bluebeard” tale has much less of a clique outcome compared to most fairytales. Having a perfect life and relationship with someone is nonexistent because everyone experiences struggles along the way. Although not every spouse ends up as a psychotic murderer, nowadays many relationships end in divorce because the person they thought they knew and married, changed or was not who they expected.

Hardly any fairytales expose post marital life and as a result young readers view marriage as an end point in life. As author Marcia Lieberman explains, out of the popular collection of fairytales, The Blue Fairy Book, only a few stories out of the thirty even go into aspects of marital life. Eighteen of the thirty literally end in the ceremony. Although there may be multiple weddings in the book, the reader rarely gets
a perspective of married life (394). This is very startling because from a young age, girls are indoctrinated with the concept that marriage in the main goal in one’s life. How can this be if they are never given any information about what to expect? Girls who do not want marriage to be the main focus in their lives are seen as “stuck up” for denying a man’s hand (393). This puts even more pressure on girls to conform to societal ideals to avoid being viewed as an outcast. Marriage is constantly promoted as the main goal and therefore becomes an end point in one’s life rather than a new beginning. By constantly authoring tales of marriage, and by having it as the focal point in fairytales read to girls, they are being set up for a period of uncertainty in their lives.

When analyzing the common phrase in fairytales, “they lived happily ever after,” the authors place a clear emphasis on “lived.” “Lived” is a past tense verb as though both are dead. Through the marriage both Bluebeard and his wife have destroyed each other in different ways (Barzilai 510). Bluebeard both emotionally slays his wives and then physically disposes of their bodies in his bloody chamber. His current wife, in return, has her brothers kill Bluebeard before he has the chance to kill their sister. When reading fairytales, this terminology is often overlooked. When taken literally it forces the reader to address why a past tense version of their “happiness” is ensured to the reader but never observed. A happy ending does not really occur; it is a mechanism to keep society assuaged because the couple assaulted each other to the point where their happiness is now a past tense, fleeted moment.

By analyzing different elements of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm versions of “Bluebeard,” society’s idea about marriage is that it is for economic prosperity regardless of the consequences. This is proved by overlooking atrocious character flaws in their spouses, leading to imminent loss of innocence, subordination to male orders, and acceptance of traditional gender roles, all harming female and male sense of identity. “Bluebeard” is a fairytale that is rarely read because of its unusual violent tendencies and graphic imagery. Many do not know this tale simply because it has not been commercialized through a Disney film adaptation. This is disheartening because it is a valuable critique on traditional fairytales and their obsession with marriage. There is a need for more exposure to the “Bluebeard” tale because it warns both males and females about the pitfalls of acting according to societal assigned gender roles and the over significance of material possessions. Happy endings are forced upon the reader because most people would rather marry a stranger that they may not be in love, with in order not to be alone and to be supported or protected. Marriage in fairytales has become an instrument to move up the social ladder and a means to a higher reward no matter the restraints, rather than an expression of love. By misusing the institution of marriage, both women and men fall into stereotyped gender roles.

Women become discouraged from achieving their life goals or obtaining roles of power because they believe a man will create their true happiness. True love defies these ideals and separates duties more equally by disregarding societal norms. “Bluebeard” is an example of consequences that arise when an individual bases their happiness on superficial characteristics instead of true love.

References


